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ANYONE FOR ZOOMS AND SPINS, LOOP-DE-LOOPS AND HUMPTY-BUMPS?

JOAN WHO?

An upstart from the east with a shopping list in her hand

By Margaret Drury Gane / *Photography by Frank Prazak*

DURING A BLEAK drizzle, the building at the rear of the CBC's Jarvis Street parking lot looks clean, functional and drab. Inside, there's a tatty confusion of plastic coffee cups ground underfoot and thick black cables snaking through dust and gum wrappers. Studio One opens beyond the mess, a vast factory of a place cluttered with cameras and unused furniture shoved into the gloomy fringe where I stand. To one side, seven pairs of running shoes have been laid out, tongues panting under the hot lights. One corner reverberates with glittering orange and blue slabs behind a familiar logo which is clearly what Marketplace is all about: a silver dollar suspended like a massive watch before a camera.

"Run through," intones a Cecil B. De Mille voice, and a tense silence descends. George Finstad, restless and Nordic, juts his chin, clamps his lips. Behind a prop desk, lines caulked with beige make-up, every hair in place, Joan Watson turns amiably into her camera. And suddenly, the place is filled with Stompin' Tom Connors' whanging voice and heeled boot banging out a theme song full of cynical, consumer-oriented lyrics. As it fades, Joan Watson's creamy face fills the monitor. "Running shoes," she says, making eye contact with millions of viewers. "Which ones give the best wear for your dollar, and where can you buy them? Tonight, we're going to tell you."

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Because of the three-year success of Marketplace, Joan Watson has become the most consistently visible consumer advocate in Canada, a fact which seems to throw her into some confusion. She wants to be noticed, but must it always be because she has unearthed rotten meat or exposed a four-room rug deal that covered more loopholes than floor? And why must being noticed exact such a toll on her privacy? For Joan Watson is a very guarded person.

She settles down to talk with me, looking fatigued but game. The interview scares her. "It's the first," she says. "You wonder how it will sound, down in print for everyone to read." This comes through in her careful sentence structure, the pauses while she forms phrases free of stumbling or awkward syntax. Though she seems nervous, it might just as easily be vigilance.

The Joan Watson CBC viewers see has been packaged for television. When she first got the chance to co-host Marketplace with Finstad, Watson went to work to revamp her image. She took the headlong gallumph out of her walk, lightened her dark brown hair to a Gabor blonde and slowed down the rushing pace of her words. But she is too practical to think that the show's incredible success is due to her appearance on it. "The material is sure-fire," she says. "We're doing something for people that they just haven't the resources to do for themselves. *That's* what the public tunes in for, *not* to see me."

That comes off sounding pragmatic and sensible, and it's backed up by the highest ratings for a CBC show since This Hour Has Seven Days went belly up for being, of all things, too controversial. More than three million people see Marketplace every Sunday night, and mail plops in by the sackful. All of which gives Joan Watson some personal satisfaction, though it still leaves her out in left field longing for star status. Stars are people like Adrienne Clarkson and Barbara Frum. They get on magazine covers and deal with the pithier status things — world affairs, politics, news. So Watson is caught between gratitude for exposure on Marketplace — the show that doesn't star anybody — and hunger for some of the recognition and glamor accorded to people who have made it in shows with their names right in the title.

Consumerism, Watson will tell you, is basically dull. She goes on with apparent enthusiasm about the show, its purpose, how she muddled accidently into it in the first place. But now, after three years, running shoes and canned peas must inevitably be beginning to wear a little thin.

"I admit I feel ignored by the media. I think they regard me as an upstart from the east, with a shopping list always in my hand. For all the success of Marketplace, there are still people who say 'Joan *who?*' Maybe consumerism is important, but it's just too grassroots to be exciting."

Possibly this discontent accounts for her bouts of unscheduled nuttiness on the show. One incident still makes the companies in question seethe when her name is mentioned. With a Consumer Association of Canada representative, Watson was displaying the innards of several frozen meat pies, well-known brands bought at random and tested in the CAC's kitchens. Of the lot, only two were good enough to eat. The others lay dissected, their scant cubes of meat and bits of vegetable awash in murky gravy — all pronounced rancid and inedible. In a moment of unregretted impulse, Watson suggested they do what any homemaker would do under the circumstances — dump them in a garbage can. Only she did it on camera, with close-ups of each name, so the audience would know what to avoid. All hell broke loose after the show.

"Grossly unfair and totally irresponsible!" fumed a Canada Packers spokesman. "What if you had just had one for dinner that night? How would you feel?" Pointing out that other products bearing the company name suffered an immediate drop in sales because of "that bloody show," he said that a lawsuit had been seriously talked about but was later dropped. Watson is quick to say that the facts were as stated and her reaction perfectly natural. "I don't expect them to like what I do, and I really don't care. The important thing is that they got worried enough to look into their own production practices."

This kind of freewheeling abandon on Watson's part, the quality that does make her a character, is getting too rare. However, much of the sting and bite that characterized her earlier work on radio has been plowed under, leaving a tame, battened-down style that occasionally mars the credibility of her delivery. Maybe, after three years, the show is palling a little? She pauses over this, torn between loyalty and ambition. Ambition wins. "It's been good for me," she says, "but I don't think I want to do it for the rest of my life."

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Joan Watson recalls her Maritime years in colorful detail — until asked about her childhood and family. Then the storm shutters go up hastily; the frankness is gone. She gives the impression she was born the day her father moved the Nelson family — there's also a brother, Arthur — from Halifax to Moncton just in time for her to enroll in high school.

"I honestly can't remember ever wanting to be anything *but* a broadcaster. Maybe I was naive, but it never entered my mind that I couldn't be one, even though I was taking the easy four-year commercial course in high school. That was obviously a mistake on somebody's part because it effectively ruled out university." Did her parents decide what she'd take? She answers obliquely: "Nobody thought of higher education for girls then." If it didn't bother her much in the 1940s, it seems to rankle now, because she doesn't hesitate to lavish praise on the people who detected more in Joan Nelson than a future stenographer. "One person who really inspired me was Elsie Crickard, my English teacher. Elsie thought I was wasted in the course, and was forever at me to aim higher. I had more help from her than anyone." Including family members?

"They weren't very impressed with aims like that." How do they view your success? She taps long rosy fingernails together, and the look in her eyes is definitely frosty: "Let's just say that they don't give it much thought one way or the other, and leave it at that." She indicates that she wants to drop the subject by changing it. "I used to hear the CBC's affiliate station, CKCW, and since it was expected

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"She's 100 percent pure feminine woman, and a great cook"

that I get some sort of part-time work, I decided to try there." She was just 14, so the request to 'get into radio' was considered premature. But a couple of years later, Joan was hired by the station manager as a writer of commercials, co-host of a 15-minute morning show called Javex Jill And Bill, and later, an interview program reminiscent of crooked pinkies and demurely crossed legs, Tea With Joan. She winces at the outdated sound of them now, but acknowledges their value as training. "In a small station, you got a real education, doing everything from weather reports to covering the coronation. They sent me to London when Elizabeth was crowned, and it turned me on to travel. I think I'd still get on anything that moves."

When she married Bill Watson in 1954, moving became a way of life though it was restricted to the Maritimes. "I'd become used to that nomad existence because my father's job with the North Atlantic Command meant moves for the entire family, like it or not." As it turned out, Amherst, Nova Scotia, was hardly progress. It had no radio station, few jobs. Joan took to selling used cars.

"It's a rotten job, really rotten. Straight commission and cold canvass, which meant I'd drive out into the country trying to spot a car in some farmer's lane in worse shape than the one I was driving. Then I'd pull up and try to convince him to buy."

Though the opening of Amherst's CKDH was a relief, it was a small station off in the swamps, with a tendency to black out when neighboring cows investigated the transmitter. She covered the Springhill mine disaster from there. "It was shattering, trying to be objective when so many people I knew personally were involved." A few years put in working her way "sideways — it was rarely *up* in the Maritimes," and Bill was transferred to Fredericton, where Joan joined the powerful Radio Atlantic station. "They were some of the most interesting interviews I did. Lord Beaverbrook was difficult, he wouldn't unbend. I talked to him in his art gallery, and all I remember is the smell of bacon cooking and a big blackhead on his nose I was longing to squeeze."

When her husband was told he was being moved to Toronto, Joan left the station and everything they owned — the house, the furniture — thinking it would be temporary. Though she remembers it as a hectic upheaval, the trauma was caused more by the fact that she had to begin all over again. "I quickly got to like a large city," she says. "But where it was a good promotion for Bill, I found out that all my Maritime experience meant nothing. Nobody was impressed. The nearest I could get to radio work was writing commercials at CHFI. I hated the place." Her next job with an ad agency worked out better, and led to a job with the CBC when a friend told her that they were looking for a woman commentator for the daily noon farm broadcast.

"I really didn't want it. Farm news was the last thing that interested me. But I was going nowhere, it looked like a chance to get into radio again, so I took it, with some misgivings." George Finstad, who had just moved to Toronto from the west coast, thinks that Watson's misgivings often form a catalyst for change. "The original idea was to have her do an old-fashioned chitchat kind of thing, with recipes and household hints. It just wasn't her style. Instead, she zeroed in on the consumer, who was scarcely mentioned, and innovated the idea of comparison shopping on air." The business of naming names, telling shoppers who to avoid, meant a swift rise in the show's ratings but caused some furious flak both within the CBC and from manufacturers and food chains. Dominion Stores, mentioned more frequently than others, still don't rate as big Watson fans. Improbably dismissing her as "just one member of the vast press corps monitoring the marketplace," they wouldn't join Loblaw's or A & P in talking to her about their business relationships. "Too bad," Joan declares. "They missed their big chance to come up smelling like a rose."

This isn't the kind of statement likely to endear her to companies who have been on the receiving end of her investigations, and a colleague believes that there is a strong streak of barely-disguised glee when she can openly air a consumer complaint: "You have to remember that her background was tough and competitive. And the economic situation in the Maritimes was terrible, so you can bet she had a rough scramble because there sure wasn't any women's lib in the fifties! Then take the Toronto thing. I think she was treated like a country hick at CHFI. Maybe it doesn't show on the surface, but there's got to be some old bitterness kicking around, some distrust of people in power . . ."

When Dodi Robb, executive-producer of Marketplace and now a close friend of Watson's, decided to give the public a prime-time show that exposed the facts of buying and selling, she admits that Joan's strong points were solid research, persistence and hard work. "I'd been to Mexico when she was there, researching stuff for Radio Noon, and while other people took breaks around the swimming pool, she'd be in her room, typing like mad." Still, it wasn't enough. Joan's initial television appearances were distinguished by a walk that Robb compares to "a frantic horse running out of a burning barn." A high-strung eagerness to make this new chance work for her seems to be mixed with another quality that was more useful to a consumer-oriented show: "She has a gut feeling for the underdog," Dodi Robb claims, "probably because she was one. I think that helps in this job, though I suppose it's bound to make her looked biased. She's admitted bias for the consumer, which may not look objective enough for some companies. But we don't use anything until it's double-checked."

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Joan Watson is now comfortably off. She has a measure of fame. And she feels she still has a way to go before she peaks. But she also has long hours and weird, frantic schedules. It made me wonder how her 20-year marriage to Bill Watson was standing up to the buffeting.

Invited to come over one sultry night, I was taken around to the back patio of an elegant Tudor house in Toronto's posh Kingsway. Four bedrooms, four bathrooms, a housekeeper by day, a Cairn called Mags, and a cat named Morris.

"I'm still selling," Bill says cheerfully, "still peddling. With Wajax Industries — lift trucks and materials handling equipment." It suits him. He's a six-foot, heavy-boned man in his late 40s, with a bulldog jaw and fine brown eyes. He says that these days, he's the one who gets home every night. Does he ever get lonely? He stiffens slightly, and lists his hobbies. Gardening, making an organ which he may even learn to play, photography. Sometimes friends drop by. No, he's not lonely. His delight in Joan's success is obvious and genuine; no apparent ego problems because his wife has moved up, gets fan mail and lectures occasionally at universities. When he goes in the house to mix a couple of drinks, I remind him that I'd like to see the old snapshots he's kept of Joan's upward mobility, 20 years of photographs she'd told me went back to their Maritime days. That's when a curious overprotection crops up. With my drink I get a pile of preselected snaps — every one recent, flattering, every one of Joan. Unconvincingly, he tells me he can't find the album, and I have to make do with a culled, careful selection lying in my lap.

Plainly, questions about his marriage are out of order. "Sometimes," he says, "when you read the stuff about well-known people, you get the feeling the interview is looking for skeletons in the closet. Well, we don't have any. We've got a great thing going for us." He shows me more photos in the fading June light. Joan posed in a bikini. Joan in a convertible on a rare trip down east, standing, waving above an inked sign saying Joan Watson. Joan walking on the beach. Answering the phone in a long flowered housecoat in their kitchen. It's the closest I'll get to seeing their house, because he does not ask me in. Privacy is jealously guarded, maybe because they get so little time together these days. Last year, Marketplace research took Joan to Spain, Australia, Fiji, Tahiti, England, New Zealand.

Yet the changes in their lifestyle aren't obvious. I remember his predilection for John Wayne assessments of his wife: "She's 100 percent pure feminine woman, and a great cook." When I ask Bill if he ever felt that it had been unfair for him to expect her to leave her own hard-won jobs every time he was transferred, he admits that it didn't bother him: "To me, her work was incidental, and at that time, just a necessity. If I were moved again, I guess I'd expect her to come with me." Joan had taken a lot longer to answer that question and there were signs of some consciousness-raising: "Back then, like every other married woman, I automatically put my husband's job first. Now, I'm not so sure. Things are just beginning to break for me professionally after a lot of hard work. I wouldn't want to give this up . . ."

In fact, about the only ties that Joan retains of her past are the Moncton High school dictionary on her desk at work and a boat she had made to order, the first she's owned since the weather-beaten punt of her Halifax days.

Somehow, the boat "I paid for myself" summarizes what Joan Watson is all about. "I specified every detail," she says. "Hand-carved natural wood, with clear varnish so I can see the grain, and leather-wrapped oars studded in brass." Urbanized, gussied up to move slickly over the water, that skiff says a lot about distances travelled and status achieved since Joan had to peddle used cars on the dusty side roads of Nova Scotia. She likes to tell of the time when she was out cold-canvassing and workmen dismantled a bridge, which meant she had to detour 65 miles to get home. "Maybe," she'll reflect, "they were trying to tell me something." Clearly, she got the message. Make your own detours, and don't look back. ◁

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